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# THE ARTIST

A Duologue

BY

A. A. MILNE



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A. A. MILNE

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## THE ARTIST

SCENE.—*It is the hall of a country cottage—a man's cottage. Through the open door from the garden a woman comes suddenly. She looks behind her to see that she is not followed; round the hall to see that she is alone; then gets to work. It is a letter she is wanting; one which has just come by post, and should be waiting here for its owner. Now she is at the writing-desk, and she is no longer alone. There is a man at the open window. With a sigh of relief she has picked up half-a-dozen letters from the desk, and is beginning to look through them, when he interrupts her.*

HE (*politely*). Yes?

SHE. Oh, how you startled me! (*She sees that it is a stranger.*) Oh!

HE. How do you do? I'm sorry I startled you.

SHE. Yes. You see, your being the wrong person made it particularly startling.

HE. That would make it worse, of course.

SHE. I thought you were going to be Mr. Matheson.

HE. I'm afraid I'm not.

SHE. Oh well, it isn't your fault. I expect he got the name first.

HE. Was Mr. Matheson expecting you?

SHE. Yes. . . . Or rather, no.

HE (*politely*). Just as you like.

SHE. Thank you very much. Then I think perhaps it's—it's—— No.

HE (*nodding*). The noes have it.

SHE. You see—— It's dreadfully hot to-day, isn't it?

HE. Dreadfully.

SHE. Yes, I don't know when I've been so hot.

HE. It's hot work, of course.

SHE. What is?

HE (*waving a hand at the desk*). That sort of thing.

SHE (*indignantly*). Are you presuming to suggest, Mr.—

HE. Bathurst.

SHE. Bathurst, thank you.

HE. Not at all.

SHE. Are you presuming—— Won't you sit down?  
(*She indicates the sofa, which has its back to the desk.*)

HE. Won't you?

SHE. I think I won't, thank you. I like standing. It's supposed to be good for the figure. But won't you? (*She points to the sofa again.*)

HE. I think I'll improve my figure too, if I may.

SHE (*under her breath*). Bother!

HE. I beg your pardon!

SHE. Nothing. I was just—— Bathurst, didn't you say your name was? It's very hot, isn't it?—Have I said that before?

HE. Not just in those words. You expressed a similar idea—— Shall I put those letters down for you?

SHE. Oh no, no thanks. I—I like holding them.

HE. I was just going to send on Mr. Matheson's letters for him. It's the second post, isn't it? May I—— (*He holds out his hand.*)

SHE (*with surprise*). Oh, are these his letters? So they are! (*She does them out to him.*) One, two—— (*The third is the letter she wants. She drops the others on the floor.*) Oh, how silly of me! (*As he bends down to pick them up, she slips the letter in her bag. But he is too quick for her.*)

HE (*holding out his hand*). And what about that one?

SHE. Which one?

HE. The one in your bag.

SHE. How quick you are, Mr.—er——

HE. Bathurst.

SHE. Oh yes, of course.

HE (*holding out his hand again*). May I have it?

SHE. No. No, you see, this is mine.

HE. Addressed to you?

SHE. Addressed by me. I wrote it.

HE (*doubtfully*). Oh! How do I know?

SHE. Well, I've just told you.

HE. Yes, but——

SHE (*taking the letter out of her bag*). Oh, my dear man! There! Take that! Now, look at that very carefully with one eye, and watch me very carefully with the other. (*She goes to the desk, takes an envelope and addresses it.*) No deception whatever. No elastic up the sleeve or anything. There! (*She stands up and holds the letter next to his.*) Any resemblance?

HE (*grudgingly*). Well——

SHE. Don't bother about the thumb-mark on yours, because that's the postman's.

HE. Well, of course—I suppose if you say you did——

SHE (*whisking the letter away from him*). Oh, my dear man, did you think I'd come to steal the postal orders? Well, I must be off. You wouldn't like to give me something to drink first? All this sort of thing is terribly exhausting, as you remarked a little while ago.

HE. Of course. (*Going to the table.*) Cider cup?

SHE (*going to the sofa*). Beautiful. (*She sits down and he brings her a glass.*) Thank you. I'll give you a toast. (*She raises her glass and he raises his.*) The Head Female Searcher at Scotland Yard! (*She laughs gaily and drinks; he drinks rather uncomfortably.*)

HE. Yes, but all the same there's a bit more to it than that.

SHE. Yes, there is. (*Firmly.*) What are you doing here, my man? This is Mr. Matheson's cottage, and you say your name is Bathurst. That's very suspicious.

HE. I have taken the cottage furnished.

SHE. Oh! Oh, well, of course—— But Mr. Matheson ought to have come back to-day.



HE. He suddenly changed his mind. He came down this morning for some more clothes, and went off again. I rather wanted to stay on, and — Here I am.

SHE. Here *we* are. (*She drinks to him.*)

HE. Exactly. And I'm sorry to seem to harp on the subject, but when once a letter has gone through the post, it isn't the property of the writer any longer.

SHE. Oh, I'm sure that's wrong.

HE. It's the law, I believe.

SHE. You must have got it the wrong way round.

HE. I don't think so.

SHE (*winningly*). Try thinking so. (*She pats the sofa encouragingly.*)

HE (*shaking his head*). No, really. (*But he sits next to her.*)

SHE. You aren't a judge or a policeman or a clergyman or anything strict, are you?

HE. As a matter of fact, I'm an architect.

SHE. Oh well, they're *never* very strict. When they say it will be three thousand, it's always four.

HE (*smiling and shaking his head*). It's no good.

SHE. It wouldn't help if I ordered a couple of houses? Hot *and* cold?

HE. I'm afraid not.

SHE. Oh! (*Earnestly.*) If I told you that I wrote this letter on a mad impulse, and that I now regret the impulse, and want to save Mr. Matheson the great pain of reading it, what would you say? (*She leans towards him.*) What would you say?

HE (*suddenly*). I'd say "I don't know if it's true, and I don't care if it's true, keep the letter if it would make *you* happier."

SHE (*leaning back triumphantly*). Ah! . . . (*Gently.*) Thank you. . . . It *is* true, you know.

HE. That's all right. Don't bother about it any more. (*Getting up.*) Have some more cider-cup, won't you?

SHE (*giving him her glass*). No, thank you. (*He puts it down.*) Have you ever had mumps?

HE. Had what?

SHE (*blowing out her cheeks*). Mumps.

HE. As a child, I suppose. Why?

SHE. Oh, nothing. (*After a pause.*) It *was* true, you know. About that letter. I was running away.

HE. From—him?

SHE. Yes. We were engaged—almost married, you might say—banns called—invitations sent out—presents pouring in—meeting each other's aunts—you know. Well—anyone could run away from a husband, but it takes some pluck to run away from that sort of thing.

HE. By Jove, it does!

SHE. It had been a longish engagement, and—of course it was bad of me, but—we'd always been fond of each other—in a sort of way, and—well, there it was.

HE. Er—*where* was it exactly? I mean which one was this?

SHE. Not Mr. Matheson. The other one. He asked me to run away from it all and marry *him* at a registry office. I said I must tell *him*.

HE. All these hims—— Is that Matheson? The second one?

SHE. Of course. I must tell him first. He said, No. Write to him. Write to him so as he gets it in the afternoon, and we'll be married in the morning. I said I would. That was this morning . . .

HE. This morning, yes.

SHE. I went to the registry office to meet him—this morning. I'd written to George——

HE. Mr. Matheson?

SHE. Yes. Down here. He hadn't been using his cottage lately, but he'd told me he was coming down to-day. So I wrote last night—it would get here second post—and I went to the registry office—rather excited, you know, and wondering if I was being a perfect fool, and all that.

HE. I know.

SHE (*opening her bag*). Well, I got there, and what do you think I found?

HE. The other man.

SHE. I found this. (*She takes a telegram from her bag, and gives it to him.*)

HE. Am I to read it?

SHE. Please.

HE (*reading*). "Have mumps. Writing. Henry."

SHE. Have mumps. Writing. Henry.

HE. Well?

SHE (*scornfully*). Well!

HE. After all, it wasn't *his* fault.

SHE. Well, it wasn't mine.

HE. No, but I mean——

SHE. Mumps!

HE. Of course, one doesn't look one's best—but you needn't have seen him while he—I mean——

SHE. I never want to see him again.

HE. Oh come, that's hardly fair, is it?

SHE. I don't mind his *having* them; anybody might *have* them. But to—*to time* them so badly.

HE. Well, I must say I'm rather sorry for him.

SHE. Of course you men always hang together. You're all alike.

HE (*indignantly*). We're nothing of the sort. I should never dream of having mumps on my wedding day. I'm not that sort of man at all.

SHE (*gently*). Aren't you?

HE. Of course not. All I meant was that I was sorry for Henry because he has lost you. Anyone would be sorry for him. A man with a great big face—and a broken heart——

SHE. His heart isn't broken.

HE. Why not? Mine would be.

SHE. Ah, yours! But you're different!

HE. That's what I keep saying. Different, but to a certain extent sympathetic with him in his great loss.

SHE. Wait! You haven't heard the worst. As soon as I read that telegram, I—well, what could I do? I was staggered. I said (*hushily*) "Thank you, thank you," and went home all dazed. And when I got in, the first thing I saw was another telegram!



Imagine how eagerly I tore it open! (*Giving it to him.*) Here it is.

HE. Am I to read it?

SHE. Please.

HE (*reading*). "Have mumps. Writing. Henry."

SHE. Have mumps. Writing. Henry.

HE. The same mumps?

SHE. The same mumps.

HE. Well?

SHE (*scornfully*). Well!

HE (*thoughtfully*). Of course, I see what you mean.

SHE (*waving at the telegrams*). Look at them! "Have mumps. Writing. Henry." "Have mumps. Writing. Henry." Doesn't that show you the sort of man he is?

HE (*nodding*). Methodical.

SHE (*bitterly*). He's probably telegraphed to all his relations in just the same words. All over the country telegrams are being delivered—"Have mumps. Writing. Henry." All the managers of all the hotels we were to stay at on our honeymoon——

HE (*doubtfully*). Would he be Henry to them?

SHE. You would have thought that he would have taken the trouble in the second telegram to put it a little differently. "Sorry have mumps"—or "Sudden bad attack of mumps"—or even "*Having* mumps." But a man who can sit down to write two telegrams exactly the same——

HE (*doing his best for HENRY*). He was lying down, poor chap.

SHE. Well, one can't marry *that* sort of man.

HE. He isn't an artist, that's all. An artist is always feeling for the perfect way of expressing himself, and never finding it. Henry, not being an artist, found it at once, and stuck to it. "Have mumps. Writing. Henry." It expressed all that he had to express. The vague dissatisfaction which the artist always feels, never came to Henry. I mean—not in that way . . .

SHE. You know, *you're* rather interesting.

HE (*pleased*). Am I?

SHE. That's quite right about being an artist. (*Nodding to herself*.) That's what's the matter with me.

HE. How?

SHE. I'm always looking—and never quite finding.

HE. First, George; then, Henry?

SHE. Yes. At least, when we say "*First*, George"—

HE. Exactly.

SHE. Yes. (*She sighs*.) Yes. (*Brightly*.) Now where was I? Oh yes, that second telegram. Have mumps. Writing. Henry. That maddened me—being the same as the other. I telegraphed back "How funny. So have I. Bettine." And dashed down here.

HE (*to himself*). Bettine!

SHE. You see, I knew I couldn't marry George. George didn't express me properly. I couldn't say what I wanted to say with George—do you know George well?

HE. I know his solicitors better.

SHE. I think one does.

HE. Now what do you mean by that?

SHE. Only that sometimes when you're talking to George, you feel that you are talking to his solicitors. What I call the "My dear child" manner. "My dear child, leave this to me." I oughtn't to be talking like this to you in George's house, ought I?

HE (*sitting next to her again, and whispering in her ear*). No!

SHE. Particularly to you who are so very strict.

HE (*indignantly*). I'm not strict!

SHE. But I wanted you to understand. So, you see, having written to George to say that I was running away with another young man, and then finding he was having mumps instead, I dashed down here to get the letter back. Because it will hurt George less if he feels that I just don't love him enough, than if I told him there was a Henry.

He. Because . . . And I know I've heard that name—

She. It's a pretty name, isn't it?

He. Because Conway—of course! (He jumps up.)

She. That's not!

He. Yes, I passed a letter to you — (Slapping his pocket, Good Lord, No, I didn't.

She. What sort of a letter?

He. This morning I wanted to go into the village — Matheson gave me a lift on his way back to London — asked me to post a letter for him — (He is feeling in his pocket, here you are — Good Lord, I might have forgotten it for ever.

She (pouting). This one hasn't passed through the post yet?

He. No.

She. So that it will belong to Mr. Matheson. That is the law, I believe?

He. I really don't know. It can't matter much.

She. I'm very strict in these affairs. (And suddenly she snatches it away from him.) Who keeps the stamp?

He. You keep the letter, and give me the stamp. That's fair.

She. Very well. (She opens the letter and gives him the envelope.) You can use it for your next letter to his wife. (She reads.) Oh? (He is looking the other way, the perfect gentleman. She says more loudly.) Oh!! (He still takes no notice. She turns to him.) Oh!!! (Then he has to say something.)

He (awkwardly). I say, I hope—

She. Be a man of that order now—quickly. (He goes for it.) Well, really!

He (bringing back one for her and one for himself). Here you are.

She. I'll give you another soon. (She raises her glass.) Henrietta!

He. Henrietta, wherever she may be.

She. He doesn't mention her name, but she corresponds to my Henry.



HE. Good Lord, you don't mean——

SHE. I'm jilted. Yes. They were married this morning.

HE (*hopefully*). Perhaps *she* got mumps too.

SHE. Nobody that mattered could get mumps on George's wedding day. He arranges his life too well for that. "My dear child, leave it to *me*." She left them to him.

HE. I say, what a beastly cad! I've a jolly good mind not to pay his rent this week.

SHE (*violently to herself*). If only he'd got my letter first! (*Appealingly*.) I did jilt him first, didn't I? You're a witness.

HE. You did. I swear! I'd swear it before a solicitor.

SHE. Couldn't we draw up a statement——

HE. Couldn't we just send that letter on to him?

SHE. Which one?

HE. Yours. If the postmark is clear——

SHE (*looking at him admiringly*). How brilliant you are! I didn't know that architects were like that. (*She opens her bag and takes out the letter.*) There you are.

HE (*examining it*). That's all right. It's as clear as anything. Did you date it inside too?

SHE. The day of the week—Wednesday, 10.30 p.m. Just like that.

HE. Good, then we've got him. I'll send it on to him to-day. He gave me an address—an hotel in Wales.

SHE. How helpful you are. You think of everything.

HE (*smiling modestly, and then suddenly frowning*). By Jove, I've thought just of something!

SHE. What?

HE. Why, you say you're getting married in this. And then he'll come back from his honeymoon, and——

SHE. And I'm not.

HE. No, you're not.

SHE. It's awkward, isn't it? Oh, why didn't I

just jilt him without going into particulars about Henry.

HE. Did you go into particulars about Henry? I mean, did you mention his name?

SHE. Not his actual name. But I said I was marrying him at once, and—— Couldn't we steam open the letter, and then I could write another and use the old envelope, and——

HE (*quietly*). I could suggest a better way than that, if I were privileged to advise her. (*He comes close to her.*)

SHE. What?

HE. That she should post the letter as it is——

SHE. But——

HE. And then *be* married when he comes back.

SHE (*surprised*). To Henry?

HE. Good Heavens, no!

SHE. To whom, then?

HE (*sitting next to her*). To anybody who, having offered himself for the experiment, was lucky enough to be accepted.

SHE. To some old friend, perhaps, whom she knew well?

HE. Well, no. I think that, as an artist, she should avoid the *cliché* and trust rather to the inspiration of the moment.

SHE. But we decided, didn't we, that the artist was never satisfied with his inspiration for—for much more than a moment?

HE. One seeks always for something better, yes; for some more perfect means of expression. It would be up to him of whom we are talking to be always just out of her reach, so that it was always he whom she was seeking.

SHE. Isn't that rather the woman's way?

HE. Hers, too.

SHE (*after a pause*). Is there such a man?

HE. She could spend a week or two in wondering.

SHE (*nodding*). All George's honeymoon, in fact.

HE. Yes. . . . It would be amusing if George came down here with Henrietta——

SHE. And found you——

HE. And my wife——

SHE. Just leaving.

HE. Yes. My wife would explain carefully to Henrietta about the kitchen boiler or the oil stove or some other domestic trifle.

SHE (*smiling*). I shall love doing that.

HE. No, you won't. You'll be much too happy to love doing that.

SHE. You seem very sure.

HE. I'm not a bit sure really, but I have an idea it would be fun if we were married. Shall we try walking out?

SHE (*after a pause*). No harm in trying. (*She looks at her watch and gets up.*) I ought to be going, I suppose.

HE. How did you come down? Car?

SHE. Good gracious, no. Third class.

HE. Good, then I'll walk with you to the station. And what about to-morrow. I shall be coming up to London for a week. Could we dine somewhere?

SHE. Easily, I should think. As long as it's cheap, and I pay my share. Soho-ish.

HE. Right. (*He sits down at the desk and re-addresses her letter.*) Just wait a moment. . . . I'm glad that fellow got mumps.

SHE (*sighing happily*). Yes, wasn't it lucky?

HE (*getting up*). There! Now, do we send it to George, or don't we?

SHE. It's rather final, isn't it? (*They stand looking at it together.*)

HE. It commits you to a husband; not necessarily to me.

SHE. I've got a sort of idea it will be you or nobody.

HE. Yes, I've got that sort of idea too.

SHE. Well, let's bring it along with us and see how we get on.

HE. Yes, let's.

(*She stretches out her hand to it, and each holding one end of the letter, they walk out together.*)



*Continued from second page of cover.*

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